



THE IMPACT OF RACIAL BIAS AGAINST MINORITY STUDENTS IN PREDOMINANTLY WHITE SCHOOLS

Eva Steinbacher

Research Scholars Program, Harvard Student Agencies, In collaboration with Learn with Leaders

ABSTRACT

This anthropological paper examines the intricacies of racism against students of color in predominantly white schools through comprehensive research, interviews, and data analysis. The goal is to better understand how racism impacts minority students and to provide insights into how these students can be better emotionally equipped to handle such situations. The study finds that even minor incidents of racism can have detrimental effects on the mental health and academic performance of students of color. It also highlights the issue of racism being deeply embedded in the culture of predominantly white schools. The argument is made that racism experienced in school can lead to serious mental health issues and hinder learning outcomes.

KEYWORDS: Racism, Minority Students, Predominantly White Schools, Mental Health, Academic Performance, School Culture

THESIS STATEMENT

This paper explores the pervasive issue of racial bias against minority students in predominantly white schools, demonstrating through a combination of literature review and personal interviews that such bias significantly impacts the mental health and academic performance of these students, and emphasizing the urgent need for systemic changes and targeted interventions to create more inclusive and equitable educational environments.

INTRODUCTION

Racism is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against someone of a different race based on the belief that one’s own race is superior.” The isolating effect of racism on developing minds is complex and can linger, leading to long-term psychological impacts. When students continually experience racism at school, the educational environment can become toxic. A perplexing research observation is that “black students in predominantly white schools are more likely to hear racial slurs used by classmates and feel socially excluded than kids in more diverse schools” (Rickmers & Sellstrom, 2023).

Having experienced racism in a predominantly white school, I understand firsthand how damaging it can be to a student’s mental health. I was subjected to dehumanizing and degrading names such as “monkey,” the n-word, “dirty black person,” “slave,” and “zebra.” These incidents of direct and indirect discrimination, along with racial harassment, often occurred unnoticed by teachers. Even though I attended that school for a little over a year, the cumulative impact on children who spend their entire educational journey in such environments can be devastating.

In one instance, I stood up for myself by presenting compelling evidence to the principal—a typed document with statements

from at least a dozen other students, each signed at the bottom. Both the guidance counselor and principal dismissed our concerns entirely. This paper builds on personal experiences and those of others, clarified and supported by research, to argue that racism experienced at school can lead to serious mental health issues and hinder learning.

By examining the intricacies of racism against students of color in predominantly white schools through comprehensive research, interviews, and data analysis, this paper aims to better understand how racism impacts minority students and provide insights into how these students can be better emotionally equipped to handle such situations.

METHODOLOGY

This research utilizes a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data to investigate the impact of racial bias on minority students in predominantly white schools. The qualitative aspect involves a detailed literature review of existing research studies, articles, and books that examine the relationship between racial bias, mental health, and academic performance in educational settings. This review helped to understand how these topics intertwine and provided a theoretical foundation for the study. Additionally, the history of racism was researched to contextualize the findings. The quantitative data is derived from in-depth interviews conducted with minority students, as well as one white student, to capture their personal experiences and perspectives on racism in these schools. By using this mixed-methods approach, the study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of how racial discrimination impacts both mental well-being and academic achievement. This methodology is well-suited for exploring the complex, subjective experiences of the participants while grounding the findings in established research. However, the reliance on interviews limits the study to a small sample size, which may not represent broader trends across different

educational contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Interviews

Three in-depth interviews were conducted to gather personal experiences and insights into how racism affects mental health and academic performance. The participants included two minority students and one white student, all of whom are freshmen in high school. The purpose of including a white student was to gain an alternative perspective and showcase how growing up in a predominantly white school can desensitize individuals to racism.

The interviews were structured to ask questions about the participants' experiences and feelings while attending predominantly white schools. This qualitative data aimed to provide a deeper understanding of the personal impact of racial bias.

By combining the findings from the literature review and interviews, this study aims to present a comprehensive analysis of the dangerous impact of racial bias against minority students in predominantly white schools.

RESULTS

Teacher and Administration Bias

The rejection of change and innovation in predominantly white private schools perpetuates deep-seated racism and prejudice through established rules and traditions. Research indicates that racially biased teachers are more likely to penalize students of color while overlooking similar behaviors in white students, thereby validating the comfort white students feel in expressing blatant racism. According to Thompson (2022), "black students are more likely to be suspended than white students for the same behavior. Factors contributing to this include implicit bias (unaware/unintentional) and explicit bias (aware/intentional)." This systematic racism leads to the "preschool to prison pipeline," where minority students, conditioned to believe they are inherently bad through unjust mistreatment, may act out accordingly.

Student Experiences

Teachers' and administrators' oversight of racist behavior enables a toxic cycle of racism among students. In environments where racism is normalized and tolerated, students of color endure both short-term and long-term effects. A study by Naomi Priest (2014) found that "across seven schools, 263 students (54.4% female), ranging from 8 to 17 years old ($M = 11.2$, $SD = 2.2$), reported attitudes about other racial/ethnic groups and experiences of racism." This pervasive mistreatment fosters the development of depression, anxiety, and various other mental health issues among minority students.

Mental Health Impact

Research demonstrates a significant link between the perception of racism and mental health. Masko (2014) reviewed "66 studies that demonstrate the real and significant link between the perception of racism and mental health." Furthermore, Williams (2018) notes that "experiences of racial harassment

can have profound effects on the work behaviors of people of color." This negative impact extends to students' academic performance and overall well-being.

Interviews

Interviews with students revealed personal experiences of racism in predominantly white schools. An African American student from a traditional school in Delaware recounted numerous incidents of racial harassment and discrimination by both peers and teachers. These experiences have significantly impacted her mental health and self-esteem, contributing to her decision to leave the school. Another minority student reported similar experiences at a different predominantly white school. She described instances of being unfairly dress-coded by teachers, while white students violating the same rules faced no repercussions.

A white student admitted to witnessing racism but felt powerless to intervene. She described the racism she observed as a daily occurrence, normalized by both students and teachers. All three students expressed fear of speaking up against racism and worried about further persecution.

These interviews highlight the severe impact of racism on minority students in predominantly white schools, illustrating the pervasive nature of the problem and the urgent need for systemic change.

DISCUSSION

Impact on Learning and Mental Health

The persistent cycle of racist behavior in predominantly white schools has profound and lasting effects on minority students. The accumulation of racist comments and discriminatory actions creates an environment that is extremely distracting and detrimental to learning. As previously mentioned, black students in predominantly white schools are more likely to face racial slurs and social exclusion (Rickmers & Sellstrom, 2023). This pervasive racism makes it difficult for students to focus in class or even feel safe in common areas like lunchrooms.

Personally, there have been numerous days where I could not concentrate in class or attend lunch because of the racist behavior I encountered. Such experiences highlight the immediate impact of racism on educational engagement and performance. The constant stress and anxiety resulting from these encounters also contribute to long-term mental health issues, including depression and low self-esteem.

Broader Implications

The implications of these findings extend beyond the individual experiences of students. The systemic nature of racism in schools perpetuates a culture where discriminatory behavior is normalized and goes unchallenged. Research indicates that black students are disproportionately suspended and penalized for behaviors that are overlooked by white students (Thompson, 2022). This inequity not only affects academic outcomes but also reinforces negative stereotypes and biases.

The "preschool-to-prison pipeline" is a stark example of the

long-term consequences of such systemic racism. When teachers unjustly punish minority students, it ingrains a belief in these students that they are inherently bad, leading to behavioral issues and further disciplinary actions. This cycle can have lasting effects on a student's life trajectory, increasing the likelihood of future interactions with the criminal justice system.

Recommendations

Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach. Schools must implement comprehensive anti-racism training for teachers and staff to raise awareness of implicit and explicit biases. Creating an inclusive curriculum that reflects diverse perspectives can also help combat the normalization of racism in educational settings. Additionally, schools should establish clear policies and procedures for reporting and addressing incidents of racism to ensure that all students feel safe and supported.

CONCLUSION

The research question guiding this study was: How does racial bias against minority students in predominantly white schools impact their mental health and academic performance? The findings indicate that racial bias significantly harms minority students, leading to severe mental health issues such as depression and anxiety and adversely affecting their academic performance.

This study highlights the pervasive nature of racial bias in predominantly white schools and its detrimental effects on minority students. Through literature review and personal interviews, the research shows that discriminatory practices by teachers and peers contribute to a toxic environment where minority students feel unsafe and unsupported. The data underscores the urgent need for systemic change to address these issues effectively.

Future research should expand on this study by including a larger sample size and a more diverse range of schools. Longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into the long-term effects of racial bias on students' mental health and academic trajectories. Additionally, exploring the effectiveness of different anti-racism interventions in schools could help identify best practices for creating more inclusive and equitable educational environments.

This research contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing empirical evidence of the harmful effects of racial bias in predominantly white schools. It underscores the importance of addressing these issues through systemic change and offers practical recommendations for educators and policymakers. By highlighting the personal experiences of affected students, the study adds a valuable perspective to the ongoing discourse on racism in education and its impact on student well-being and achievement.

REFERENCES

1. Priest, N., Perry, R., Ferdinand, A. et al. Experiences of Racism, Racial/Ethnic Attitudes, Motivated Fairness and Mental Health

Outcomes Among Primary and Secondary School Students. *J Youth Adolescence* 43, 1672–1687 (2014). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-014-0140-9>

2. ACAS. (2023, August 21). Types of race discrimination: Race discrimination at work - ACAS. Retrieved from www.acas.org.uk website: <https://www.acas.org.uk/race-discrimination/types-of-race-discrimination>
3. Kohli, R., Pizarro, M., & Nevárez, A. (2017). The “New Racism” of K–12 Schools: Centering Critical Research on Racism. *Review of Research in Education*, 41(1), 182–202 <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732x16686949>
4. Ford, C., Johnson, S., & Partelow, L. (2017). The Racist Origins of Private School Vouchers. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED586319.pdf>
5. Huber, L. P., Johnson, R. N., & Kohli, R. (2006). Naming Racism: A Conceptual Look at Internalized Racism in U.S. Schools. *Chicano-Latino Law Review*, 26, 183. Retrieved from <https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/chiclat26&div=13&id=&page=>
6. Rickmers, Alexis, and Oren Sellstrom. “Racial Bullying in Schools Is on the Rise - Including Here in Mass..” *Cognoscenti*, WBUR, 19 Oct. 2023, www.wbur.org/cognoscenti/2023/10/19/racial-bullying-george-floyd-alexis-rickmers-oren-sellstrom
7. Thompson, Hayley. “Explaining the Preschool-to-Prison Pipeline and Suggesting Solutions.” *Loquitur*, 16 Feb. 2022, theloquitur.com/explaining-the-preschool-to-prison-pipeline-and-suggesting-solutions/
8. Dhaliwal, T., Chin, M., Lovison, V., & Quinn, D. (2020, July 20). Educator bias is associated with racial disparities in student achievement and discipline. Retrieved from Brookings website: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/educator-bias-is-associated-with-racial-disparities-in-student-achievement-and-discipline/>
9. Constantine, M. G., & Sue, D. W. (2006). Addressing Racism: Facilitating Cultural Competence in Mental Health and Educational Settings. In Google Books. John Wiley & Sons. Retrieved from <https://books.google.co.in/books?hl=en&lr=&id=0GyFCSPvBfoC&oi=fnd>
10. Oxford Dictionary. (2024). Oxford English Dictionary. Retrieved from www.oed.com website: <https://www.oed.com/?tl=true>
11. Williams, D. R. (2018). Stress and the Mental Health of Populations of Color: Advancing Our Understanding of Race-related Stressors. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 59(4), 466–485. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6532404/>
12. Masko, Amy. Racism and Mental Health: Are Schools Hostile Learning ..., 2014, scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2045&context=lajm.